

# Playgoing





# BOOKS BY JAMES AGATE

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# PLAYGOING

by James Agate

*Being one of a series of essays  
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These Diversions*

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To  
DAME MADGE KENDAL



# PLAYGOING

## I

WHEN I was a boy a constant visitor at my father's house was Gustave Garcia, son of Manuel Garcia the centenarian teacher of singing, grandson of the great Garcia for whom Rossini composed "The Barber of Seville," and nephew to Malibran and Pauline Viardot. Viardot, who made her début in the same year as the great tragédienne, Rachel, lived to a great age. I remember that Garcia could never mention the old lady without alluding to her striking ugliness—"like a horse"—and dwelling upon her extraordinary distinction of manner and delicate wit. She was the life-long friend of Turgenev. Malibran, whose husband was De Bériot, the violinist and composer of pieces for the violin, died the year before Queen Victoria came to the throne. She broke a blood vessel singing in the Church which is now the Manchester Cathedral. It was with a thrill that we youngsters heard Garcia's "My aunt used to say . . ." introducing some precept of the great artist who had been fifty years in her

grave and to whom De Musset had written the stanzas in the French poetry book. Garcia and my father were as young men apprenticed to the same wholesale linen-draper, and spent some three years together in a warehouse before deciding that linen-draping was not good enough and that there were better worlds than St. Paul's Churchyard. My father chose Manchester, Garcia Milan. My acquaintance with my father's friend dated from my seventh year, and with him I connect recollection of my first domestic "scene." The old boy—for so, affectionately, we called him always—arrived late from London, and about ten minutes before the guests at the dinner-party which my parents were giving in his honour. The reader must understand that a provincial dinner-party in the 'eighties was a solemn affair connoting ardours and complexities of preparation. Two days before the party a voluminous and authoritative lady would descend to the nether regions and take charge; there was immense unwrapping of silver and polishing of glass, and about four in the afternoon a waiter from my father's club would with unsuspected napery from my

mother's store-cupboard and flowers from the nurseryman's give to the dining-table an air of strange magnificence. My father and mother were upstairs dressing, having left instructions that their chief guest should be conducted to his room immediately upon arrival. They should have known better. Espying me in the hall the old boy insisted on being taken into the dining-room to "look at the lie of the land," actually to inspect the claret. Now there happened to hang over the fire-place an engraving of a battle-piece by Rubens which, to Garcia's eye, needed cleaning. "Let's have it down, boy," he said. And in two minutes, despite all objections, the picture was out of its frame, the epergne was removed from the dinner-table, the old boy's coat was off, and he was hard at work with india-rubber for the mount and bread-crumbs for the picture. Battalions of servants flew upstairs to fetch the higher powers, and my mother arrived on the scene in tears and at the very moment when our starchiest guests were being ushered into the drawing-room. Garcia could not understand apology or the need of it, and my mother had to

find what consolation she might in my father's explanation in which I heard for the first time the word "temperament." Later in the evening Garcia made amends with some glorious airs from Mozart and Lulli, concluding, as he always did, with Gounod's exquisite "Au Printemps," one of the few first-rate things of that intensely second-rate master.

For many years I associated Garcia with Sundays and a more orderly dinner-table. I come of Nonconformist stock, and every Sunday morning was forced to attend divine ratiocination in the ugliest building ever put up to the glory of God and the shame of an architect. There was a barber's shop next door, where pale and clammy little boys destroyed their thin hands on the stubble of navvies recovering from Saturday night's debauch. My mind still reels at recollection of pavements newly spittle-strewn and the stench of stale fish. I used to think that five little boys in sailor-suits made a ridiculous procession, and that the street-urchins laughed at us as we passed. I think so still. Arrived in chapel we had to endure long, extempore prayers and even longer extempore sermons in which a half-

starved and wholly subjugated minister thanked the Creator for the great artists whose works, could he have understood them, would have left him boggling in amazement. This weekly torture, which was a subtle compound of boredom and exasperation, ended only when the re-formed procession had arrived home again, and continued for twenty years. But my father, when he was not chapel-going, was a man of considerable culture. He took the art of acting seriously, if not the theatre, and would spend Sunday's dessert-hour telling us of the great players of the 'forties, 'fifties and 'sixties. We were allowed one visit to the play a week, but even on those nights the front door was closed and locked at eleven although Peter Street, where the Manchester theatres were, was twenty minutes away by the speediest of two-horse trams. (I never saw the end of *Hamlet* until I was out of my teens.) It was Garcia who ultimately secured for us an extension of half-an-hour. My father had been relating how as a boy under pretext of attending a lecture on astronomy he had run up to London from his home in Horsham to see Macready in *Virginius*. Garcia

chuckled. "In future, old friend," he said, "you will lock the door at half-past eleven, and give these young dogs a chance!" And from that time onward the rule was modified.

It is to those Sunday discussions that I trace my love of the theatre, of acting, of actors. At the age of fourteen I had intimate knowledge of the characteristics of players who to the present generation are hardly a name—players like G. V. Brooke, who was drowned in the wreck of the *London* after exhibiting a quality of heroism which prompted Professor Morley's dry encomium: "Though he could not act Shakespeare, he must have been a noble fellow." I could fill the whole of this little essay with recollection of my father's table-talk. Sufficient if I say that among the actors upon whom he dwelled most were Barry Sullivan, Fechter (whom he thought over-rated), Samuel Phelps, Charles Mathews, Alfred Wigan and Little Robson. Of Irving he would say that, devoid of feeling for tragedy, he was the greatest actor in melodrama the English stage had known, holding more pathos in his little finger than Fechter possessed in his whole body, and

that he was to boot a surprisingly fine comedian. It is from my father that I derive my knowledge of Irving's Macaire, Jingle, Hamlet, Vanderdecken, Charles, and many other parts which he had abandoned before my theatre-going days. Of actresses he spoke principally of Helen Faucit and Ristori. In the matter of plays I got to know, without seeing them, every detail of *The Hunchback*, *Belphegor*, *Plot and Passion*, *The Lady of Lyons*, *London Assurance*, *Masks and Faces*. When Garcia was with us the talk was largely of opera, of *Norma* and *La Sonnambula*, of Mario and Grisi, Titiens and Lablache.

I want the reader to gather the significance of all this. Here was a family living not only in Manchester but in a suburb of that grey, calico-bound city, and having for its most frequent visitor a direct descendant of the most talented artistic family Europe has ever produced. The reader must know—and I promise to cut these personal matters as short as possible—that my grandmother, a music-mistress and a widow dying of cancer, denied herself every luxury and almost the means of existence to enable her to send my

mother and her sister to school in Paris and Heidelberg. It will be gathered that my grandmother was something of a martinet. Certainly her spirit descended to her daughter who made every one of her children practise piano or violin for one hour before breakfast every morning of their lives. We were taken religiously to the Hallé Concerts, made to speak French and to learn French poetry. (German found her more relenting.) Imagine, therefore, the effect upon young over-strained minds of the lion-headed, self-willed, strictly unaccountable old man, whose moustache prickled horribly when he kissed us, whose manners were atrocious, who on holidays spent with us fished hopelessly and bicycled ludicrously. Yet it was for his grandfather that Rossini composed his opera, and for his aunts that De Musset wrote poems and a great novelist sighed. Malibran's husband was the very De Bériot through whose Seventh Concerto my second brother was struggling. Garcia would tell us how entralling some dead and gone diva had been in *Lucia*, and did I not grapple every morning for an hour with Thalberg's awe-struck paraphrase?

We were, I repeat, a Nonconformist family, yet every Sunday one subject and one subject only defrayed the conversation—*the theatre!*

The poet was not the only person to make the discovery that we are not cotton-spinners all. We got that out of our own heads, and tacitly assumed that beyond the Manchester Exchange there was a world so rare and disturbing that from one Sunday to another we were forbidden to think of it. We were allowed to go to concerts without question, and to as many as we had pocket-money for ; but the theatre, with the exception of the Shakespeare productions of Mr. Benson, was always the occasion for diplomacy. Yet that in which we were allowed a minimum of practical indulgence was my father's one and only topic. Six days in the week he shut the door on Paradise but on the seventh flung it wide open. Now what theatre does the reader suppose that we discussed ? The answer is : Any and every theatre, except the intellectual. My father, who would not have the telephone in his house, never entered a motor-car and refused to believe that anybody else could, should, or might

make use of these inventions, stoutly denied the existence of the Intellectual Theatre. He laid it down also that the intellectual actor is an actor who cannot act. Temperament, he said, and not brains is the whole basis of the player's art. It was maintained of a lady in one of Shakespeare's plays that though she could guess what temperament should be, she knew not what it was. The average Englishman neither knows, guesses, or cares what temperament may be, except in so far as apprehension may enable him to avoid it. Temperament is the antithesis of all that is meant by Eton and Harrow, and there can be no doubt that Arnold of Rugby would have preferred diphtheria in the school. "I think," said Hogarth to Horace Walpole, "that it is owing to the commonsense of the English that they have not painted better." "Fists and not fiorituri" should be the national motto. You cannot upper-cut the other fellow with a sonnet, and an ode to the chin never knocked anybody out. The Englishman's view of art or rather the temperamental side of art, is represented by the dying Sir Anthony Gloster:

Harrer an' Trinity College ! I ought  
to ha' sent you to sea—  
But I stood you an' education, an'  
what have you done for me ?  
The things I knew was proper, you  
wouldn't thank me to give,  
And the things I knew was rotten,  
you said was the way to live.  
For you muddled with books an'  
pictures, an' china an' etchin's  
an' fans,  
And your rooms at college was  
beastly—more like a whore's  
than a man's."

Bravo, England !

Now there is no reason why we should expect the English to be temperamental actors. We do not expect a greasy Italian to stand up to fast bowling on a bumpy wicket, but we do ask him to sing, and sing like the bullfinch, canary, or whatever feathered darling it was that was adjured by Private Ortheris to open its blarsted little beak and pipe like blazes. The English have given the world its greatest dramatist, its greatest novelist, and half-a-dozen lyric poets finer than those of any other country, whereas our musical

score is almost blank. (Elgar is a divine fluke, Delius has always lived abroad, and neither has his root here. And in what, pray, should they be rooted—Balfe, Wallace, Sterndale-Bennett, or the composer of “The Roast Beef of Old England”?) But acting is music and not, as the intellectuals would have it, mathematics ; and the English are strictly unmusical as Lord Beaverbrook’s community singing has sufficiently proved. Again it is generally admitted that of all classes of mankind your intellectual has the least ear for music. Or you might put it the other way about, and say that musicians have less brain-power than any other type of manual worker. I remember my mother once rebuking a country clergyman for bicycling to a funeral. The poor fellow protested that he hid his machine behind the church and that nobody saw him. “Sir,” said my mother, “you cannot twiddle your legs and think upon God.” It is certain that no flautist can use both fingers and brains at the same time. Your intellectual is music-blind, and therefore cannot know temperament in an actor. He is aware that something is making him feel uncomfortable,

and that is all. In this connection I remember my father's partner, a crack shot, gaunt, humourless and irreproachable, vaguely possessed of county connections, under whose cheerful wing I began life. I remember a Saturday morning when Sarah Bernhardt, on her way from Buenos Aires to Timbu&too, proposed to give Manchester an afternoon taste of the Lady of the Camellias. Recognizing the necessity for posting the letters early, "I suppose, Sir," I said, "you are going to see Sarah Bernhardt?" "You suppose wrong, young man," the graven image replied, "I do not approve of that sort of acting, and should be glad to see it discouraged." I have never forgotten the queasy piety with which, as the poor, dignified fool said this, the whole Nonconformist Conscience overflowed his narrow eyes and dribbled down his thin beard.

Temperament has never come nearer these shores than the porters of Calais or Boulogne. Your baggage is taken from a nation of great actors and handed to the representatives of fog and phlegm. I am as firm for temperament as Hamlet's Aunt was for blood. "There are some

low minds," said that lady, " which would bow down before idols, services, intellect, and so on. But these are intangible points. Blood is not so. We see blood in a nose, and we know it. We meet with it in a chin, and we say, ' There it is ! That's Blood ! ' It is an actual matter of fact. We point it out. It admits of no doubt." The actor's temperament admits of no doubt. Either he possesses it or he doesn't. We may say about acting what the golf professional said to the duffer : " I look's at it this way, sir. There's some gents as can play the game, and there's some gents as can't and never will." It takes me less than fifty seconds to recognise in an actor that which, if he is not born with it, he will not acquire in fifty years. Recently, after the first act of a fashionable comedy, I felt a tap on my shoulder and heard a middle-aged voice saying : " Excuse me, Sir, but would that actor be Mr. Dashington Blank ? " I said that it would. " I thought so, " said the voice, " I was at Cambridge with him, *and he batted like that.*" You saw the temperament in Irving before, in *The Bells*, he had shaken the snow from

his wraps. And in the case of the greatest player of all time—except possibly Rachel whom I never saw—you recognised temperament even before the artist appeared. What else but Sarah's temperament was it which “made one's pulse beat feverishly before the curtain had risen : there was almost a kind of obscure sensation of peril, such as one feels when the lioness leaps into the cage, on the other side of the bars.”

I am aware that with this gift of temperament goes a capacity for stupidity which should be beyond the scope of man. “Is it, perhaps, that I have eaten too much macaroni ?” was the thought uppermost in the mind of Balzac’s tenor as he fretted the cathedral vault with sound. The women are worse. You have only to consider the programme of any mistress of *bel canto* sunning herself in the arc-lights of the Albert Hall to realise the depth of the witless abyss, a chasm to make the listener yawn. (It is a moot point whether the coloratura singer or the fashionable fiddler is the bigger fool. To be compelled to decide between the broken melodies of Vieux-temps and Wieniawski and the unbroken

insipidity of *Shadow Song* and *Mad Scena* is like having to choose between the rescue of wife or mother. There *is* no choice.) It is fortunate that one cannot argue by analogy ; otherwise a likening of the old-fashioned opera-singer to the temperamental actor might defeat my argument. But the cases are not on all fours. Give me an actor who can act in any sense of the word, and let there be nothing but vanity in his head, and I will yet get out of his pose and voice and gesture and even the jut of his thigh a Hamlet which will bear some resemblance to the original. You, on the other hand, shall be at liberty to produce your intellectual darling, steeped in Pirandello to the very lips, and set him mooning upon the stage ; and the best he will achieve will be to resemble a well-laid fire to which the housemaid has forgotten to apply the match. Temperament, and not intellectuality, sent Bernhardt on the rampage over the habitable and uninhabitable globe, set Duse sighing for more woes to suffer, and made Réjane the habit of the civilised world. It was temperament, and not self-analysis, which dictated Sarah's reply to the clergyman

who deplored her probable effect on Chicago's moral uplift: "Cher ami, entre cabotins il faut s'entendre." It was temperament, and not a capacity for finding her way in the Norwegian fog, which enabled Janet Achurch to quell drill-halls by the single power of her eye. It was Irving's temperament which at the words "I had a lime-kiln once," sent a shudder through the house and brought to present sight that cremation of twenty years earlier.

Intellect cannot manifest itself through the body, whereas temperament has no other means. The actor of temperament may achieve his effect before he has begun to speak, whereas your intellectual actor requires an infinity of words. (Incidentally, that is what Mr. Shaw's plays are for.) Consider the famous entry of Mrs. Siddons in Franklin's wearisome tragedy, *The Earl of Warwick*. At the back of the stage was a large archway, through which appeared the captive Margaret of Anjou, preceded by four Guards, who divided two by two on each side, leaving the opening clear. Instantly on their separating the giantess burst upon the view and stood in the centre of the arch,

motionless. "So electrifying was the unexpected impression," writes George Barclay, who played the King, "that I stood for a moment breathless. But the effect extended beyond me; the audience had full participation of its power; and the continued applause that followed gave me time to recover and speculate upon the manner in which such an extraordinary effect had been made. I could not but gaze upon her attentively. Her head was erect, and the fire of her brilliant eyes darted directly upon mine. Her wrists were bound with chains, which hung suspended from her arms, that were dropped loosely on each side; nor had she, on her entrance, used any action beyond her *rapid walk* and *sudden stop*, within the extensive archway, which she really *seemed to fill*. This, with the flashing eyes and fine smile of appalling triumph which overspread her magnificent features, constituted all the effort which usually produced an effect upon actors and audience never surpassed, if ever equalled." Does the reader think that it was intellect or temperament which enabled Grimaldi in his Clown's dress to terrify the house with the Dagger Scene from *Macbeth*?

When he sang, “An Oyster Crossed in Love,” seated between a cod’s head and a huge oyster that opened and shut its shell in time to the music, was it a quality of the brain, or a simple note in the voice, which shot the grotesque with touches of real pathos, and dissolved the children in tears? What but the *actor* in Robson enabled him to introduce into a farrago of clog dancing, nigger melodies, mummery and buffoonery an impersonation of Medea couched in doggerel and slang yet so terrifying that the great original, Ristori herself, felt the shadow of eclipse and went away saying : “Uomo straordinario! Uomo straordinario!” Praise of the victor by the vanquished is praise indeed. I see Kean’s genius most clearly in a sentence of the defeated Junius Brutus Booth. Jealous of Booth’s success, Kean lured the young man away from Covent Garden to the Lane, and having invited him to play Iago to his Othello put forth all his powers to overwhelm him. Talking of the performance to his son, Booth said that no mortal man could have equalled that rendering of despair and rage, and that Kean’s “Farewell—Othello’s occupation’s

gone," sounded like the moan of ocean or the soughing of wind through cedars. Among the other great temperamental actors of the past I should most like to have seen Ludwig Devrient, and principally because of his Lear. Devrient's make-up for the mad king was like a head by Caravaggio, except that it had greater nobility. I am reminded, by the way, of a certain young actor of our own epoch who from time to time descends upon Plymouth, Walsall and Gravesend with performances in Shakespearean repertory. *He plays Lear with the longest beard the part has known.* Which means, his wife informed me, that he must begin to make-up immediately after breakfast. "How about matinées?" I asked. "Before Charles was married he used to make up for matinées the night before," she replied. "But now, to please me, his afternoon Lear wears a half-beard!" The part was beyond Devrient's physical powers. So much so that after his second act he often fell into an epileptic fit, which necessitated either the abandonment of the performance or a modification of effort during the later scenes. If the great German somewhat exceeded here the

precept about the modesty of nature he had at least this excuse that Lear overstepped it first. Von Holtei writes of a performance which he saw as a boy of thirteen :

“ Devrient played with overwhelming, violent exaltation ; it seemed to me that the emptiness of the house spurred him on to exert himself trebly, in sheer defiance. After the Second Act there was a long wait. At last the stage-manager came before the curtain, and informed the small audience that Herr Devrient had fallen in a fit, and was quite unable to go on acting. The evening’s performance must therefore unavoidably be considered at an end. The audience left quietly. I ran about in the street outside, driven by a deadly fear, keeping my eyes on the door by which the actors went out and in. . . . At last they brought him out, still dressed, in part, in the old king’s costume. It was a strange scene. The disordered clothing, the pale face, the bright daylight—it was in the summer—it was as if they were carrying a dead man from the battlefield.” Next after Devrient I should like to have seen Lemaître. “ Elegant as a man of the world,” says Joseph Méry, “ brutal

as a costermonger, bashful as a child, impudent as a valet, naïve as a young girl, trustful as a simple townsman, corrupt and crafty as a pasty-faced rascal, taciturn as a conspirator, open and laughter-loving as a good and happy dinner-guest, dark as a thunder-cloud, tumultuous as the thunder itself . . . overwhelming tragedian and sublime clown . . . who makes you weep with his choking tears, who makes you laugh with his laughter, till you roll underneath the benches." I should like to have seen this actor as the gambler in Ducange's *Trente Ans, ou la Vie d'un Joueur*, to have watched that descent into poverty and crime, till all that remained was the ragged, crook-backed *lazzarone* with nothing left except the expressive eyes. I should like to have seen him take the loaf, cut it, put the first slice into his pocket with a "*pour ma famille.*" I should like to have seen him when, after committing a murder, he brought the gold home to his wife, and replied to her anxious questioning : "*Je l'ai trouvé.*" I should like to have heard that murmur run through the audience, as the abyss opened before their eyes.

Those who remember their Brontë will know all that they need ever know about Rachel's temperament. Contemporary criticism has left us a picture of what Rachel was like in *Phèdre*—a figure wasting away, consumed by secret fires, standing on the verge of the grave, with pallid face, fevered eyes, emaciated frame, an awful, ghastly apparition. It appears that in the second act, where Phèdre declares her passion to Hippolyte, Rachel was transcendent. Her brain was in a tumult of madness, and thoughts were uttered upon which she did not dare to dwell. She knew her passion to be diseased, as odious to her who felt it as to him who was its object. The quiver of excitement in which her third act left her audience was said to be comparable only to that occasioned by Kean in the Third Act of *Othello*, and not even the English actor surpassed in force the terrific exclamation : “ Misérable ! et je vis ! ” G. H. Lewes writes : “ Whoever saw Rachel play *Phèdre* may be pardoned if he doubt whether he will see such acting again.”

Since those words were written we have seen Bernhardt's *Phèdre*. Who

that ever saw *that* entry and remembers the infinite pathos of the opening lines :

“ N’allons point plus avant, demeurons,  
chère Oenone.

Je ne me soutiens plus ; ma force  
m’abandonne :

Mes yeux sont éblouis du jour que  
je revois ;

Et mes genoux tremblants se  
dérobent sous moi.

Hélas ! ”

can believe that Rachel so troubled the heart ? It is possible that the older actress had a darker, gloomier passion. The slow, deep, mournful intoning of her apostrophe to the sun, with its magnificent close :

“ Soleil ! Je te viens voir pour la  
dernière fois ! ”

impressed those who heard it by its immeasurable grandeur. Against this, we must put the terrific spate of frenzied diction with which Sarah used to utter those sixty lines culminating in the wrenching of the sword from Hippolyte :

“ Au défaut de ton bras prête-moi ton  
épée ;  
Donne ! ”

It is certain to my mind that Rachel never touched the pathos of Bernhardt's *Phèdre* when she contrasted the innocent loves of Hippolyte and Aricie with her own guilty passion :

“ Tous les jours se levoient clairs  
et sereins pour eux.”

And is it seriously suggested that Rachel, at her finest, could have so moved the heart to pity at the end ? There must have been awe and to spare in Rachel's dying. But did she breathe out the odour of crushed violets at the words :

“ Déjà jusqu'à mon cœur le venin  
parvenu  
Dans ce cœur expirant jette un froid  
inconnu ;  
Déjà je ne vois plus qu'à travers un  
nuage  
Et le ciel et l'époux que ma présence  
outrage ;  
Et la mort, à mes yeux dérobant la  
clarté,  
Rend au jour qu'ils souilloient toute  
sa pureté.”

A player may possess every imaginable quality of mind and temperament and all possible powers of mimicry and impersonation. Yet all will be unavailing if he possess a high-pitched, unmusical voice, if his features are undistinguished, or his inches too few. A great actor is one, therefore, who possesses not only the mind and the temper but also those physical attributes which make the body the perfect instrument. Let me take a single example of what I mean. There is a quality which all actors know as "tears in the voice." This is a purely physical matter; Nature either gives the actor this quality, or withholds it. No amount of study will give it, though a working simulation can sometimes be achieved. An actor who has not this faculty may be drenching his soul with tears, weeping buckets-full inside, as it were, but he will not move his audience. On the other hand, an actor who is so fortunate as to be endowed by Nature with this gift can achieve most heart-rending effects of pathos, though his mind remain as dry as the Sahara. I

remember sitting opposite a comedian at supper, and saying something complimentary about his performance in a highly emotional part. "Oh, that's nothing," he said. "Anybody can cry. Wait till I've swallowed this bit of toast and I'll show you." And having swallowed it he began: "Eyes, look your last! Arms, take your last embrace!" And before he had got to Romeo's sea-sick, weary barque the tears were rolling down his cheeks and splashing into his soup.

The mechanical gift alone does not make the great player, and the player who lacks the mechanical gift cannot be great. There is a good deal of luck about the business, luck in the sense that if you are Garrick and Kean, Talma and Salvini rolled into one, a squint will still ruin you. God-like apprehension cannot survive a hare-lip. A Romeo who has to look up to a Juliet, a Macbeth who should say, "My dearest chuck!" to a giantess capable of chucking him out of the window—these would be absurd. In the old days the critic "went over" an actor as a horse-owner goes over an intended purchase. Is he sound in wind

and limb? Is his cast of features noble, his voice agreeable, and his manner imposing? Satisfied with the actor on these essential points the critic then asked him to act, just as the buyer pleased with his animal on the floor asks to see him trot. But does the modern critic approach the modern player so? If he did, would his editor print him? And in any case, what view would a jury take of it? To clinch the matter I shall quote here the dictum of a great actress as to the necessity for bodily perfection:

“Peu importe qu'un peintre, qu'un sculpteur, qu'un musicien soient gigantesques ou petits. Ils peuvent avoir la stature de David ou celle de Goliath, être démesurément gros ou infiniment minces, être dotés de toutes les infirmités de la nature, s'appuyer sur des béquilles ou boiter, sans que leurs mérites en soient le moins du monde diminués. Beethoven et Berlioz, Michel Ange et Raphael avaient le droit d'être pieds-bots : nul ne s'en souviendrait. L'artiste dramatique est infiniment

plus déshérité : il faut que le Comédien soit grand, bien pris dans sa taille, de visage expressif et agréable, que rien ne vienne déformer l'harmonie générale de son corps. Si sa taille est au-dessous de la moyenne, il lui est à peu près interdit de paraître en scène, à moins d'un extraordinaire génie qui effacerait aux yeux du spectateur le plus exigeant, ce défaut contre lequel rien ne saurait prévaloir. Ici, l'étude, la volonté la plus tenace sont impuissantes, et il peut arriver qu'un homme remarquablement doué pour la scène, qui avec quelques pouces de plus eût laissé un nom glorieux, soit obligé d'abandonner l'art qui lui était le plus cher.

“ Le spectateur réclame encore davantage de la Comédienne. Pour elle, l'agrément physique, le charme, la séduction qui se dégage de la femme, ne sauraient être remplacés par la science la plus accomplie. Certes à force de volonté, de travail, elle peut prolonger sa jeunesse, donner, bien après l'âge mûr, l'illusion de la

fraîcheur et de l'adolescence. Mais si elle manque de la taille nécessaire, si elle ne dispose pas d'un minimum de grâce, ou à défaut d'originalité, si la nature l'a si mal dotée qu'elle ne puisse paraître à la scène sans déplaire à première vue, elle fera sagement en abandonnant toute prétention.

“Le conseil à donner d'ici aux artistes consiste donc bien à mesurer leurs forces, à ne pas assumer un rôle s'ils ne sont pas prédisposés par leurs qualités naturelles à s'exposer en public, à renoncer au théâtre si le théâtre n'est pas fait pour eux.”

Who now stands up for intellect and well-meaning ? Let me pass on.

## III

I would like to say something on the old question as to whether the player who subjugates his part to the romantic splendour of his own personality is as great an actor as the player who can abstract his personality, and build himself up into a new man with each new part. Is the “great” actor really an actor at all? And should we not find another name for his serene and magnoperative highness? For what else but the finest actors in the best and strictest sense of the word, were and are Coquelin, whose disguises as Monsieur Jourdain and Cyrano de Bergerac would have defeated Scotland Yard; Tree, each of whose metamorphoses had a separate finger-print; Laurence Irving, who could be more Japanese than the Japs, yet make the perfect English Justice of Shakespeare’s time; Matheson Lang, who can ruffle it with the Borgias or take tea with Celestials; Martin Harvey, whose Burgo-master is as far from his Pelléas as dwellers upon earth are from the people of the moon; Frank Cellier, filling both the mental and the physical eye with his

Falstaff yet dwindling to a Peter Quince whose skin hangs about shrunk limbs? But the finest performance in this line is still mere miming, and, to my mind, unless something of the heroic quality of the great actor accompanies it, an achievement of no greater significance than that of the "Protean" performer, who presents—God save us!—Uriah Heep with the aid of a red wig and Micawber by means of a cardboard dome. But I agree that the "great" actor must have some admixture of the mime. A pair of legs and a voice will not bring us to the end of both Coriolanus and Shylock. The point is one which every play-goer must decide for himself. Would you rather say: "Here's that splendid actor again. I wonder what character he is supposed to be this time?" or "That's the best Mercutio or Torvald Helmer I've seen. I wonder who the actor is?"

My own feeling is that the heroic "swell of soul" is only to be obtained in the first category. To give maximum point and beauty to Hamlet's soliloquies even in your own person is a greater thing, *me judice*, than to gum a convincing

beard to a downless chin, or at ninety simulate the lover.

I am not going to pretend that the "great" actor is not sometimes led by his own romantic splendour into some mighty queer difficulties. He can never be, or allow himself to pretend to be, at anything less than his maximum magnificence. He must inhabit the mountain top, and know nothing of the slopes. He is the sun at high noon, and in his world it can never be four o'clock. His smallest offerings take on the air of princely largesse, and if he have a trifling favour to ask he will bend a princely knee. He will even carry this into his private life, in Elliston's manner. Hence the naughty story about our noblest actor and an invitation to lunch. The guest invited said he would come. "God bless you," replied the actor in his deepest voice, and with the unction of Charles the First taking leave of Bishop Juxon.

Consider for a moment the question of personality in actresses. Take Mrs. Campbell's *Hedda Gabler* and compare Ibsen's stage direction for the presentation of this under-sexed, Northern hero-

ine with Mrs. Campbell's temperamental, Southern beauty. Hedda's complexion is "pale and opaque," her steel grey eyes "express a cold, unruffled repose," whereas Mrs. Campbell's eyes were the twin craters of a volcanic temperament, never less than ruffled and knowing nothing about repose. Hedda's hair is "of an agreeable medium brown, but not particularly abundant." Compare our beauty's raven locks, the wear of some flaunting gipsy. Could *that* Hedda have endured Tesman, his fearsome aunt and still more fearsome slippers? Would she not have thrown these latter at Tesman's silly head and herself at handsome, unscrupulous Judge Brack, leaving her husband to the aunt, the slippers, and that History of Civilisation? Yes, Mrs. Pat's Hedda would have quickly shaken Christiania's dust off her shoes, affirming, good feminine Coriolanus that she was, the existence of a world elsewhere. This Hedda was a glorious performance by one who could never, by any possibility, be Hedda. But, frankly, I would rather see a play spoiled by Mrs. Pat, than made by a lesser actress. After all, one can go home and read Ibsen. The

bigger is greater than the less, and conversely, a thick ear is among the minor shocks that flesh is heir to. If it were not so, then Sir Gerald du Maurier could be ranked with the biggest of the shining ones who have used their stardom to eclipse their parts. Du Maurier is a king of infinite space; the plays in which he appears are nut-shells; and to the modern preference for Raffles over Richard the kingdom of this actor owes its shrinkage. His virtuosity is a cadenza upon one note, but it is a fine cadenza finely played.

And now I have finished with the subject of temperament. To those who do not know temperament when they see it all explanation is unavailing; you might as well describe scarlet to the blind, or trumpets to the deaf. If I must put temperament in a phrase I would cite Sarah's "Moi, moi, et moi!" from *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Caruso's singing of "Questa o quella" from *Rigoletto*, the madcap pantomime of Seymour Hicks. Critics barely out of their 'teens dispensing greatness with the glib facility born of ignorance may pursue temperament "with forks and hope." Their pursuit

will be vain ; for them the Snark must ever remain a Boojum. Let this be said finally—if ever the great, that is to say, the temperamental actor appears again on our stage he will disperse as chaff before the wind that latest fad, the Theatre of Expressionism, the Theatre in which the producer is first, the author second, and the actor nowhere at all, the Theatre of *décor* without anything to decorate, of posture without plot, of symbol without humanity.

That temperament may upon occasion lead its owner astray, is not denied. I am reminded here to take my leave of Garcia where I last saw him. It was a hot afternoon in the summer towards the close of which he died, and I met the old boy, then turned eighty, making brave, belated acquaintance with Lord's Cricket Ground. "What scoundrels they are!" he said, with a wave of the arm which included the players, the crowd, and the world at large

THE first piece I saw in the theatre was the pantomime of "Bluebeard" in which Harriet Vernon was Selim, Ramsey Danvers Fatima, and some still lower comedian Sister Anne. It was an afternoon performance, and I remember that although I enacted the whole piece over again for the benefit of my elders the hours that evening between tea and bed-time were an aching, intolerable void. I can still see Harriet Vernon's contours, noble as Beachy Head, encased in black silk; and still hum the tune to which she sang "He's a Rider, he's a Rider." The reference, if I mistake not, was to Gladstone. My first light piece was a farcical comedy from Toole's Theatre by J. H. Darnley, entitled *The Solicitor*, in which the dénouement of what I now know to have been an extremely banal intrigue struck me as being miraculously felicitous. But before I had seen any theatrical performance other than pantomime, I had myself acted with fair accuracy and, I can assure the reader, no lack of temperament the parts of Shakespeare's Cardinal Wolsey, Molière's

Harpagon, and Corneille's *Le Cid*. The speech-day versions of these rôles were, I must believe, mercifully truncated. I was nine years old when I saw my first Shakespeare play, *As You Like It*. The curtain had not been up three minutes when old Adam displaced in my estimate Wordsworth's Father William as the world's prime bore. Will it be believed that Mr. F. R. Benson was Orlando, and Mrs. Benson Rosalind? Nevertheless, the performance made me realise that the normal world of getting and spending, of cotton grown by American negroes and made into cloth by the hands at my father's factory, was as meaningless as a moon which should be made of green cheese. Shortly after this, I came under the influence of Mr. Shaw's dramatic criticism in the *Saturday Review*. Every Saturday my father would bring home the *Manchester City News* and the *Inquirer*, which I must believe he purchased out of a sense of duty since he never looked at either of them, and the famous *Review* which he read from cover to cover. You can imagine the overthrow of my youthful soul when it became apparent to me that there was

another theatre besides that championed at our Sunday dinner table, and in addition a school of actors other than temperamental, who, if they could not act at least did something for which a case could be reasonably made out. For years I kept in my pocket book, and wore next my heart as one wears a hair-shirt, the page of the *Review* in which Mr. Shaw alluded to the scenes "when a child is dropped into a tiger's cage as a cue for Madame Bernhardt's popular scream ; when the inevitable, stale, puerile love-scene is turned on to show off that *voix céleste* stop which Madame Bernhardt, like a sentimental New England villager with an American organ, keeps always pulled out ; when, in a paroxysm of the basest sensationalism, we are treated to the spectacle of Gismonda chopping a man to death with a hatchet as a preliminary to appearing as a mediæval saint with a palm in her hand at the head of a religious procession." At the same time I would read anent this actress the pronouncement of the finest dramatic critic and best writer about the theatre in any age or clime, C. E. Montague— "Her faults are rank ; they cry to Heaven

—when she is not there. Then you see her act once more, and you feel as if you were looking again at Florence from Fiesole, or at a pheasant's neck, or Leonardo's Mona Lisa, or ripe corn with poppies in it.” This clash of authority disposed me to believe that here was a world meriting a grown man's attention. And so I decided that when I grew up I would be a dramatic critic.

Time for me has not brought about any reconciliation between these two views of Sarah. I am not going to write down the old things—critical, adulatory, anecdotal—all over again. If you saw Bernhardt in her great days you have no need of words. If you never saw her, or saw her only in decadence, then words cannot avail. To write about this actress after her death, for those who never saw her alive, is like trying to describe a rose if that flower had become extinct upon earth. Was Sarah beautiful? No, but she made every other woman in the theatre seem plain. I remember seeing her on her last visit to London, driving in a Victoria at Hyde Park Corner. As she leaned back in the carriage, extravagantly pale and with the lamp-black an

inch thick under the eyes and on her eyelids, she looked lovelier than the fairest beauty of the season. She took you into a world where fresh senses were accorded. Did one love this woman? Yes, but as that passion may be conceived on some other planet. What one felt began with admiration and ended there. One desired her just as much and just as little as one desires Cleopatra or Helen of Troy. Even William Archer was so far moved in recollection as to confess that "during her last years at the Théâtre Français she was certainly an exquisite creature."

Sarah's voice? The time-worn adjective does it less than justice; it had a quality nearer to *old* gold. Or I would say that it was a perfume stealing across an unborn sense, a fragrance recalling happiness remembered from another world. Arthur Symons puts it brutally when he says that it was as though a finger had been placed on the spinal column. Another critic will tell you that each and every word was like a pebble dropped into a well of molten rubies, or some other hyperbolic nonsense. Of course Sarah had her faults. There were days

when she would run all her syllables together into one mellifluous, unintelligible string. There were months on end when she could not be induced to play *Phèdre*. There were nights when she could not be bothered to act, and would try to make up to you in one cataclysmic ten minutes for three hours of perfunctory bamboozlement. Then she adored rubbish, and in her tours left behind a litter of Sardou to turn continents into a creditable imitation of Hampstead Heath after Bank Holiday. Perhaps a strong claim to greatness is to be made for any artist who can do without masterpieces. Or is it only a claim for virtuosity? There was no room in the theatre, one critic has said, for Bernhardt and the play of ideas as well. So much the worse for the play of ideas.

That Sarah perpetrated and perpetuated an immense amount of trash there can be no denying. Leaving on one side Dumas's threnody over the Lady of the Camellias—which is the best trash ever written, so good that it has caused me to weep when acted by actresses whom I could normally see trampled to death by shire horses—leaving Dumas's masterpiece

out of account I should judge that nine-tenths of Sarah's répertoire was pure fudge. Compare Rachel. First let me note that, according to Georges d'Heylli, the great tragédienne, whose glory undiminished by Bernhardt can now never be exceeded, founded her fame upon performances in Paris to the number of eleven hundred and fifty-six only, covering a period of seventeen years. This gives an average of little more than one performance per week. Next let me note the quality of the pieces acted, for which purpose I give here a list of those exceeding fifty performances :—

<i>Horace</i>	66	<i>Polyeucte</i>	71
<i>Cinna</i>	68	<i>Marie Stuart</i>	54
<i>Andromaque</i>	95	<i>Phèdre</i>	89
<i>Mithridate</i>	63	<i>Virginie</i>	53
<i>Bajazet</i>	60	<i>Adrienne Lecouvreur</i>	69

From which it will be seen that Rachel's répertoire was preponderantly classical and contained a minimum of rubbish, even *Adrienne* being kept within reasonable limits. Compare Sarah's colossal pasteboard expenditure, hundreds of Fédoras jostling thousands of Toscas. Riches, said the prophet, are not given

to men of understanding. Neither, he might have added, are they the portion of classical actresses. Rachel's American tour was an immense disappointment. Her first performance, in *Horace*, produced 26,334 francs, which was far from the 93,786 francs taken by Jenny Lind whose success had been the model and spur of the undertaking. *Phèdre*, Rachel's greatest rôle, produced a meagre 19,587 francs. Her biographer is amusing on this matter of discrepancy. He writes :—

“Rachel s'était trompée, ou plutôt son frère Raphaël l'avait trompée en se trompant lui-même. Il n'y avait aucune analogie entre le génie de Rachel et le talent brillant de la grande cantatrice suédoise qui devait électriser les masses par la seule magie de sa voix merveilleuse dans quelque langue qu'il lui plût de se faire entendre. Qu'importait, en effet, aux Yankees de comprendre ce que chantait Jenny Lind, pourvu qu'elle exhibât devant eux ses trilles les plus étonnantes et ses plus audacieuses roulades ? Il n'était besoin pour eux d'avoir ni livret explicatif, ni intelligence bien grande, ni goût bien prononcé pour l'art ; l'éminente cantatrice avait tri-

omphé dès le premier moment, dès la première note, et ses représentations n'avaient été qu'une suite d'ovations sans précédents dans sa brillante carrière. Avec Mlle. Rachel c'était tout autre chose ; la tragédie à laquelle elle devait son immense gloire n'eut précisément que fort peu de succès en Amérique, et la grande artiste réussit beaucoup plus devant ce public étrange, et qui, pardessus tout, ne la comprenait pas, dans le drame et la comédie, où elle n'a jamais aussi complètement excellé chez nous."

Twenty years later, the writer goes on, another tragédienne, *who had neither the genius nor the artistic reputation of Rachel*, Mlle. Sarah Bernhardt, made the same venture with vastly different results.

*Adrienne Lecouvreur* produced 28,170 francs, *La Dame Aux Camélias* 25,085 francs, and so on. Rachel's second performance of *Phèdre* fell to 16,920 francs. Finally the "illustrious tragédienne" returned home with the illness which was to prove fatal heavy upon her, whereas Sarah, having gallivanted all over America in every direction, North, South, East, West and sideways, returned to Paris with a million in pocket and sufficient

energy to attack a huge Continental tour. I am aware that the authentic mark of futility in critics is the inability to resist comparisons. It may be that Rachel and Bernhardt, and we must add Duse, raise the spectator to a state of emotion where there is no question of less or more, better or best, but only a boundless release of heart and mind. Yet cartographers cannot refrain from giving grandeur figures, whereby Scafell exceeds Snowden and Ben Nevis overtops both, though on each summit the release of climber's mind, being infinite, must be equal. I shall make bold, therefore, to continue in the comparative search. A very old lady, when I asseverated the superiority of Bernhardt's *Phèdre* over Rachel's, laughed in my face. And I remember being taken at the age of nine to see Sarah in some piece of immitigable woe. The old gentleman who took me wept long and loud into the red silk handkerchief which it was at that time fashionable to tuck into the waistcoat. Recovering somewhat, he said with a voice still shaking with emotion : "Rachel was better!" I have always regarded this as, in the circum-

stances, a masterpiece of dramatic criticism. I sometimes doubt whether Sarah was ever a tragédienne at all, whether her voice had not the defect of its qualities. Sarah could coo with the dove, hiss with the serpent, roar with the tigress, and scream with the macaw. But had she Rachel's organ roll, and could she contrive the impersonal depth and sombreness of classic tragedy? I think not. She could, I suggest, have tackled Shakespeare's Cleopatra because of the hysterical possibilities of that rôle, but could she have encompassed the starkness of the tragic close? Would she not, at the line about the infant at the breast sucking the nurse asleep, have conjured up visions of pink-buttocked amours and Botticellian crèches? Could she have played Lady Macbeth? That she could have plucked nipple from boneless gums is not denied, but how about Duncan resembling her father as he slept? I can see Sarah here, rolling her eyes like some celestial duck in an Olympian thunderstorm, breathing ethereal blasts of filial piety. (Didn't she try to show what a dear Lucrezia Borgia was, apart from that little kink about

poisoning?) And could she have been Volumnia, Constance, or any of Richard's haggish relatives? Both Rachel and Siddons were, I must believe, greater actresses than Sarah in the realm of pure tragedy. I remember at the Trocadero in Paris a performance of *Andromaque* with Bartet and Paul Mounet. It was a hot August afternoon and they sweated on their side of the curtain and we sweated on ours, and it didn't all seem to amount to very much, except the receipts which went to an orphanage. No, French tragedy without some hair-raising genius is a dull affair, and it is perhaps because Sarah could never be dull that we do not acclaim her strictly as the classical tragédienne. But that any actress ever equalled her in poetical delineation or the sheer pathetic I must strongly deny. I recall a hot July afternoon at Ealing when Sarah gave the best performance of *La Dame aux Camélias* I was ever to see. Why at Ealing? Well, with her it just happened like that. On that occasion she had, as she used to express it, *le dieu dedans*. In the evening I heard *La Traviata* at Covent Garden, with Melba faultily faultless and Caruso looking and acting exactly like

the Marquis of Carabbas. I remember that I came out half-way through the meaningless farrago, and hurriedly sought the old Tivoli where Marie Lloyd was in the bill. The day had begun with genius and, I was determined, should end with it.

Since the time of Pasta and Malibran there has been no rivalry to touch that of Bernhardt and Duse. Now I only saw Duse in a few plays, and my knowledge of Italian is confined to waiters' lingo and the titles of Mozart's arias. It is, therefore, presumptuous of me to say very much about this admittedly great genius. It is curious, by the way, that whereas I remember nothing of Sarah's *Adrienne* except the recital of the fable about the pigeons, I have never forgotten, and shall never forget the attitude—arms stretched out against the mantelpiece—which Duse took up just before plunging her nose into the poisoned bouquet. But the pose had little or nothing to do with *Adrienne*; it was Duse crucifying herself, as she insisted upon doing in everything she played. Arthur Symons has a fine passage in this connection :—

"The reason why Duse is the greatest actress in the world is that she has a more subtle nature than any other actress, and that she expresses her nature more simply. All her acting seems to come from a great depth, and to be only half telling profound secrets. No play has ever been profound enough, and simple enough, for this woman to say everything she has to say in it. When she has thrilled one, or made one weep, or exalted one with beauty, she seems to be always holding back something else. Her supreme distinction comes from the kind of melancholy wisdom which remains in her face after the passions have swept over it. . . .

"To act as Duse acts, with an art which is properly the antithesis of what we call acting, is, no doubt, to fail in a lesser thing in order to triumph in a greater. Her greatest moments are the moments of most intense quietness; she does not send a shudder through the whole house, as Sarah Bernhardt does, playing on one's nerves as on a violin. 'Action,' with her as with Rimbaud, 'is a way of spoiling something,' when once action has mastered thought, and got loose to work

its own way in the world. It is a disturbance, not an end in itself; and the very expression of emotion, with her, is all a restraint, the quieting down of a tumult until only the pained reflection of it glimmers out of her eyes, and trembles among the hollows of her cheeks."

But isn't it just possible that acting such as is described here is a teeny-weeny little bit pretentious, and the very thing to gammon the æsthetic snobs of the 'nineties? Duse's acting may have been an ineffable affair of twilight and cloisters, of water flowing under the stars; but it is not always night, neither must we be always betaking ourselves to a nunnery. Alas! that I never saw Duse in *La Locandiera*. Had I done so I should have known whether she could have played Frou-Frou. I do know that she made Marguerite Gautier into a pre-Raphaelite grisette, the story into "l'aventure très touchante de deux amants très malheureux, séparés on ne sait plus bien par quoi," and the courtesan into "une pensionnaire grondée par un vieux monsieur très imposant." I do know that she played stiff-neck'd Mrs. Alving as she would have played St. Theresa or

a Mother Superior. What, then, would she have made of Phèdre, and how comported herself as Pelléas? I suggest that Duse made too much capital out of her private sorrows, or at least that she encouraged others to do so. After all, an actress is paid like everybody else a certain sum of money to do a certain job. I am told that you were never quite sure of Duse. The theatre would be either too hot or too cold, or her sufferings too acute or too blunt. With Sarah, that good war-horse, there was no preamble. Show her the stipulated amount, and in gold, and the curtain went bravely up. If she knew anything about mental anguish she could at least put a good face on it. "As Sarah grew older," wrote Mr. Shaw, "she became altogether jollier and more sensible." Could he have written this of Duse? The second greatest actress of my time was Réjane, whom I infinitely preferred to the Italian artist. I can see her now in *La Vierge Folle*, telling the Duke whose daughter has been seduced by her husband that he makes as much fuss over the deflowering of his virgin as if it were a national defeat. And again,

sitting throughout a whole act on her trunk, her eyes and nose red with weeping, and pretending to console herself with the promise extracted from the husband that if ever he tires of his little chit he will return to her. For three-quarters of an hour she sat sobbing and had the house in tears. Réjane's greatest essay in realistic pathos was in the stage adaptation of Goncourt's *Germinie Lacerteux*. But alas! her triumph in this grim study of a servant-girl, written long before Mr. George Moore's *Esther Waters*, was long before my time. Her next biggest triumph was in Henri Becque's cynical comedy *La Parisienne*, which I managed to see once at, I think, the Vaudeville Theatre. The performance was on a Wednesday afternoon, and it must have been in the early 'nineties. For I remember that it was in the first days of motoring, that we started from Manchester early on Tuesday and had all the difficulty in the world to make Rugby before bed-time. One o'clock on Wednesday found us still on the outskirts of London, but I remember that thanks to Réjane's well-known half-hour unpunctuality, going without lunch,

abandoning the car to a staggered policeman and diving dirty and dishevelled into the theatre, we got there in time for the supreme stroke which reveals that the male party to the quarrel is the lover and not the husband. But would Réjane ever play Becque's, or Goncourt's masterpiece again? No. She came to England during the war with an intolerably silly playlet, and the over-praised *Alsace*. I met her at Arles in the South of France in 1916, where she was giving the haymakers a taste of Sans-Gêne, and she seemed to me off the stage to be a dumpish, shy sort of body entirely lacking in *savoir faire*. Yet on the scene what a miracle of wit and manner, what a mingling of *vis comica* and tears! Of all the actresses I have ever seen I put Bernhardt first with Réjane a good second and Duse half the field behind. Putting it another way, I could have borne to see Sarah twice a week and Duse once a month, but Réjane I could have tolerated every night of my life. She did not tear you to pieces as Sarah did—a delight for moderate indulgence—nor did she make you feel mean and abject, which was Duse's way. She was a-tingle with life and

vivacity ; she could be either woman of the world or woman of the people ; her *canaillerie* was as superb as her capacity for brute, inarticulate misery was heart-rending. Réjane was the daughter of a bar-keeper in one Paris play-house, and she married the director of another. She knew nothing except the theatre, but that she knew thoroughly. She was an actress first and last, and would have scorned to foist upon the public either her business affairs, private woes or any other high-flown bunkum.

Well, they are gone, and it is possible that nobody will ever want again to make comparative estimate of their powers. Will these great ones live ? Possibly in a few cold, dull phrases. But as long as those who saw these famous actresses in their prime are alive to communicate the old emotions the world must still retain some corporate sense of their greatness. I remember driving with a great Russian pianist through October woods. We had discussed this player and that, and rehearsed all the old effects and sensations. "Do you remember how Sarah said 'Nichette se marie !' and, 'On nous abandonne, et les longues

soirées succèdent aux longs jours,’ and ‘Ainsi, quoi qu’elle fasse, la créature tombée ne se relèvera jamais?’” Then my friend began to intone the great speech to Hippolyte. After a while his voice trembled and for a space neither of us spoke.

Of English actresses I put Mrs. Kendal easily first, if only by virtue of her performance in the third act of Mrs. W. K. Clifford’s *The Likeness of the Night*. The scene is the deck of a liner. The wife is going for a sea-voyage ostensibly for her health, while the husband is remaining behind ostensibly to work. What he is going to do is to have a fine time with his mistress; what she is going to do is to jump overboard. The husband has a moment of compunction as the boat leaves and takes his wife in his arms. “He has kissed me!” said Mrs. Kendal as the curtain fell, and the thrill of supreme desolation is with me yet. I remember an earlier scene in which the wife called upon the mistress. Mrs. Kendal’s face grew greyer and greyer. Then the wife noticed the toys lying about the room, the doll, the hoop, the ball, and in her eyes were envy of the

other woman and lament for her own childlessness. To my mind this was the finest piece of sheer acting that I have ever seen accomplished by an English actress. And it should be unnecessary to dwell upon Mrs. Kendal's comedy which was delicious, from the tip of her bonnet to whatever extremity that august lady will allow me to mention. She had the grand manner, a ringing voice and enough technique to go round a whole cast.

Does the reader think I have forgotten Ellen Terry? There was this difference between these two great women—that Madge Kendal might conceivably have become something other than an actress, say a leader in the woman's movement or the head of a large hospital, whereas Ellen just danced on to the stage and remained there, dancing. At her own proper job of being the darling of the educated as Mary Pickford is of the vulgar, of embodying, in her own person and without taking thought, the rose in an English hedge, joy and tears chasing each other like April cloud and sunshine, the whole labelled "The Women of Shakespeare"—at all this Ellen Terry

just couldn't be approached. She *was*, you might say, and therefore she acted. It is impossible to estimate how much wider this actress's range might have been without that diminishing partnership with Irving. Diminishing because of those awful melodramas in which there was either no part for her or something less than a part. Diminishing because of that invincible partiality for *The Bells*. Do actors never think of schoolboys and others whose night for the theatre is Saturday and Saturday only? On Saturday evening in the provinces Irving *would* play those infernal Bells with the result that Ellen Terry had to be thrown away upon half-an-hour's preliminary clowning in *Nance Oldfield*. I can remember the accents of unutterable disgust with which one or other of my brothers would throw down the paper: "Saturday evening. *Nance Oldfield* and *The Bells*. OF COURSE!" If the old man must play melodramas why did he not give us a taste of his best in that line? Would he in those later years give us his Charles I, or Louis XI? No. One had long given up hope of seeing him as Hamlet, Macbeth, Coriolanus,

Richard, Lear. Those are the rôles one has learned not to expect from a leading English actor. But why must Irving chill young admiration with Robespierre, Dante, Mathias, and Corporal Brewster? Miss Terry herself supplies the reason. "Oddly enough, Henry was always attracted by fustian," she wrote in her book. "Oddly enough" is the charitable flower, the rest is the serpent under it. And then that Shylock recurring more persistently than any decimal! How sick we were of it, and how politely the town hid its nausea. "Do you know," Allan Monkhouse once said to me, "I shall to-night write my eleventh notice of Irving's Shylock? And I said all I had to say about it eleven years ago!" One could only suppose that Irving had the scenery and the gaberdine in stock and wanted to wear them out. I have always deemed *The Merchant of Venice* a dull play at the best, perhaps because at three schools and in a dozen forms this masterpeice was my "English literature" on no fewer than seven occasions. When I am run down I wake up at nights still "debating of my present store" or muttering that bit about

“Thy currish spirit  
Govern’d a wolf, who hang’d for  
human slaughter,  
Even from the gallows did his fell  
soul fleet.”

“Nominativus pendens!” I cry, and wake up. Yet with these mountainous faults thick upon him I must declare Irving to have been the greatest actor I have ever seen. His pathos has not been equalled in my time.

Forbes-Robertson was another Saturday-night offender with that unforgivable *Passing of the Third Floor Back*, as was John Hare with *A Quiet Rubber* and *A Pair of Spectacles*. To see these exquisite players in anything worth seeing I always had to play truant on Wednesday afternoons. Treat a schoolboy according to his love of good actors in good parts, and how shall he ’scape expulsion? I remember one afternoon when I stole away to see Mrs. Patrick Campbell. This was definitely one of the great theatrical experiences of my life. The play was Echegaray’s *Mariana*. All that I remember of it now is a long scene in which Mrs. Campbell sat quite still and

told of an incident in Mariana's childhood. She was being snatched up out of her cot, and her mother's lover was crying, "Be quick! Be quick!" The actress was lovely in those days and filled the mind with a haunting sense of baffled importunacy, and sympathy for a creature engaged in strange and romantic quests. Her silences had the emotional significance of Mæterlinck's halting speech. This was an actress who, in the 'nineties, had the world at her feet. She kicked it away and the ball rolled out of her reach.

An actor dead these twenty years is Frank Rodney, who played the second parts in the Benson Company. Handsome, at least on the stage, debonair, with a reddish complexion and a glorious voice, he was the best Clarence, Buckingham, Bolingbroke, Iago and Mercutio that I have seen. What days those were when Benson skippered the team and one mistook the schoolboy will-to-be-impressed for the actor's deed. Yet that there was something about Benson not to be found in any other actor—and that something a quality of good—I will maintain against all the hosts of truth.

His Coriolanus had a lean arrogance and was not merely intolerable like the college son of a profiteer; his Caliban had pathos; there was the right kind of nobility stopping short of priggishness in his Henry the Fifth; his Crook-back contained both truculence and the toad. And, of course, his Richard the Second, or what Montague made of it, has never been surpassed on the English stage.

I have no room for Wyndham who, in a piece the name of which I have forgotten, played the part of an old man of ninety with the hands of a boy of twenty. Was Wyndham, who croaked through the *raisonneurs* in Henry Arthur Jones like a frog in spring, anything like so good an actor as Henry Neville? I doubt it. There was Tree, lamentably inept in the heroic, and a past master in the secondary business of dipping for wigs and make-up. His Marc Antony was, in my opinion, a more ludicrous business than even Wilson Barrett could have made of it. There was Alexander, as fine a gentleman as Savile Row ever turned out, and not too bad an actor. There was Lewis Waller, a player of

much greater accomplishment than the little misses of the pit would allow us to believe. If I must put my finger on the piece of acting which, Sarah apart, has stirred me most, I would say Janet Achurch as Cleopatra. Mind, I do not say that she was particularly like Cleopatra, unless we are to imagine the Queen of Egypt to have had a German mentality and to have looked like Brünnhilde. But Janet brought to the part her own greatness as a woman, her overpowering intelligence and her indomitable spirit. She had played the then unpopular master-pieces of Ibsen and Shaw in provincial holes and corners ; her voice, deep as Rachel's yet breaking in exaltation to shrillness, was the trumpet and herald of the new age for women and the drama. I was a boy then, but I can still hear every intonation in the dying speech which she delivered sitting bolt upright on the throne. With Janet to die was an exercise of the will.

These, then, have been my great experiences. Sarah as Phèdre, Marguerite, Pelléas ; Coquelin in *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* ; Réjane, Mrs. Kendal and Irving always—even in their worst plays. Ellen

BRINAGAR.  
Terry as Beatrice, Forbes-Robertson as half of Hamlet. Janet Achurch as Mrs. Alving and Cleopatra. Courtenay Thorpe as Oswald. Laurence Irving as Shallow. Hare as old Eccles and Quex. Mrs. Patrick Campbell as Paula, Magda, Mariana, and whenever she has chosen to take herself seriously. Edward Terry in *Sweet Lavender*. James Welch in *Mr. Hopkinson*. Weedon Grossmith in a score of farces. Charles Hawtrey ever.

BUT I must remember that my title is "Playgoing" and not "Playacting," and that after all the play's the thing to catch the conscience of your playgoer, be he dramatic critic or the simple fellow who goes to the theatre to rid himself of the Stock Exchange. My first grown-up experience of great drama was Miss Horniman's production in Manchester of Charles McEvoy's *David Ballard*. Even then the plaguy actors would creep in, so much so that Mr. Shaw was constrained to say of Clare Greet, who played Mrs. Ballard, that if she had blacked her face and stood on her head she would still have been perfect. Some little time after this, Miss Horniman produced as a triple bill Yeats's *Cathleen-ni-Houlihan*, and Synge's *Shadow of the Glen* and *Riders to the Sea*. There was richness for you, in Mr. Squeers's phrase, and a new kind of richness for one to whom playgoing had always meant what Mr. Pinero had invited the West End of London to think in the previous May. I remember Miss Horniman sailing about the theatre in a dress of emerald green with a jewelled

dragon suspended from her neck. It was from this performance that the venture known as the Gaiety Theatre, Manchester, sprang. It would be flattering to say that the repertory serpent turned and bit the bosom which fed it ; the truth is that it was the bosom which stifled the harmless snake. Janet Achurch, Courtenay Thorpe, and Charles Charrington gave a performance of Ibsen's *Ghosts* in a concert-room, for which performance I went round persuading Manchester's merchant-princes to buy tickets, the Germans among whom complied without exception. The Independent Theatre produced *Candida* with Janet unsurpassable in the title-rôle and Courtenay Thorpe as the one and only Marchbanks. This actor was also the Prince Hal in what I shall always regard as the finest performance of the Second Part of *King Henry IV* that I have ever seen or shall ever see. Brydone was the King, Louis Calvert Falstaff, and Laurence Irving Shallow. Perhaps the acting on this occasion was too good to enable one to see the play. Calvert gave more than Shakespeare's Falstaff—he staged Hazlitt's well-known criticism as well. Brydone

was the best King, except Frank Cellier, that I have ever seen ; Courtenay Thorpe shed real tears ; and Irving as the senile justice achieved the greatest possible pitch of virtuosity in character-acting. But it is possible, I suggest, for virtuosi by their brilliance to overlay the piece they are performing. Shakespeare's greatest comedy, and if not greatest certainly most human play, was brought nearer to the heart by a performance at the O.U.D.S. in 1926. There was a moment then when I became sensible of the greatest effect of which the art of the dramatist is capable—the Pisgah-like view of human life. The scene was the Eastcheap tavern ; the musicians were playing ; the Prince and Poins had entered in disguise ; and Doll had asked her whoreson little tidy Bartholomew boar-pig when he would leave fighting o' days and foinin' o' nights, and begin to patch up his body for heaven. From the fat knight's " Peace, good Doll ! Do not speak like a death's-head ; do not bid me remember mine end," down to his " I am old, I am old," it seemed that night at Oxford as though the world stood still and the English

centuries were spread beneath one like a map.

But I am getting too serious, and must remember that I am writing on playgoing as a diversion. Farewell the tranquil mind of Sunday's academic column; farewell that sensitive holding of the scales in which three words of misty Tchehov outweigh the low pert output of the Cocktail School—I must find metal more provocative. Was it not Bunthorne who, when he was alone and unobserved, confessed to being an æsthetic sham? Let me, enjoying the comparative solitariness of the printed book, admit to having praised many a dull thing out of sheer funk, and because generations of critics before me have praised it. Bunthorne did not care for all one sees that's Japanese. I know nothing about and care nothing for the Japanese, Chinese, or Pekingese drama, and do *not* seek the ancient Greek. I will *not* be amused by a play because two thousand years ago it amused a horde of half-naked savages—what else can they have been who knew neither the cinema nor jazz, applauded not Nora Bayes, never watched a football match on the wireless,

called no peeled rabbit cony? For me the greater value of the Shakespearean sense of responsibility has entirely destroyed the Greek notion that there can be anything tragic in man's befoolment by meddlesome gods. There is nothing tragic about the millionaire whose bank, smashing, deposits him upon the pavement. Whereas that man is a tragic creature who is the author of his own bankruptcy. Here indeed is a cause unnameable to the thrifty stars! Therefore, it follows that I am not moved when *Œdipus* is compelled by unreasonable gods to kill his father and marry his mother. "Cet *Œdipe* est donc idiot?" asked Voltaire. For *Œdipus*, being warned, all he had to do was to avoid killing a man old enough to be his father, or marrying a woman old enough to be his mother. In *Hippolytus* Euripides cannot write a *drame passionnel* of the Faubourg Saint-Germain without ascribing it to Aphrodite's pique. Hear the punctilious goddess:

"For once from Pittheus' castle to the shore  
Of Athens came Hippolytus overseas

Seeking the vision of the Mysteries.  
And Phædra there, his father's Queen  
high-born,  
Saw him, and, as she saw, her heart  
was torn  
With great love, *by the working of my  
will.*"

What nonsense is this ! Nonsense which Shakespeare himself narrowly avoided in his philandering with the Weird Sisters. What a much better play *Macbeth* becomes when you mentally eliminate the Witches ! Fortunately we have the Germans to tell us they have no existence in fact, that is, as exterior agents bringing about the tragedy, but are to be considered merely as symbols of the evil promptings of Macbeth's nature. It is childish to suggest that Macbeth is a perfectly good Scot, like Lord Dewar, until the mysterious "Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor ! All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter !" puts in his mind the naughty thought of murder. Shakespeare used these painted ghosts to please the mind of the childish Elizabethan audience. The supernatural concession apart, the English poet presents *Macbeth*

as a perfectly natural tub standing on its own bottom. I have never seen *Macbeth* without being profoundly moved, or the *Hippolytus* without being profoundly irritated. To my mind Racine made a ten times better job of the theme than Euripides, although possibly I am influenced by the fact that I saw the greatest actress of my time making in the French play the greatest success of her life, whereas in the Greek tragedy the laurels were carried off by an English actor who ran about the stage wearing very little else. But of course, if Sarah had appeared in the Greek version she would have had the wit to play the young man and remain alive and kicking till the end, instead of the queen who, half-way through the play, is as dead as the door-nail from which she is found hanging.

Gilbert's poet was not fond of uttering platitudes in stained-glass attitudes. A similar aversion has always made me avoid *The Immortal Hour*. This matter of boredom leads me unnaturally to Mr. Shaw. I find it hard to determine which is the most unseeable of this author's masterpieces, and after long cogitation, and putting *Back To Methuselah* in a class

by itself, have decided upon the following : *Pygmalion*, *Getting Married*, *Heart-break House*. The soul of this author's wit is long-windedness. The greatest mind which has occupied itself with the theatre since Ibsen, he has no sense of the theatre, but only a dislike of the theatrical. His plays contain less of drama than their prefaces, and you glean little from their performance on the stage which you could not have garnered in the library. The plays of Barrie always make me feel uncomfortable ; I am either dissolved in tears or a little sick. The Galsworthian drama makes me reflect how much better they do these things in the police-courts ; while those of Mr. Drinkwater suggest that the finest thing in the world is to be a prig. The multiplicity of Mr. Noel Coward's first nights necessitates *Adam Bede* as corrective bed-book ; and Sir Thomas Browne's *Urn Burial* is the only panacea for all the nauseas occasioned by Mr. Arlen's green-sickness. On the other side of the account I would place the all but masterpieces of Mr. Sean O'Casey and the full-blooded ironies of Mr. H. F. Maltby. But it will be a long time before any English playwright

captures the spirit of the theatre exhibited in Louis Verneuil's *Le Fauteuil Quarante-sept*.

Dramatic criticism in so far as it affects popular appreciation of plays is like driving a pig to market. It should really be considered as a ring through the public's nose, since the amount of grunting and resistance is out of all proportion to the progress achieved. I have in my possession an anonymous letter written on coroneted notepaper to the editor of the *Sunday Times*. This is the letter : " May I voice the grievance of a number of your readers in my own circle ? After long months of patience we are getting so overpoweringly sick of your dramatic critic's personal opinions and virulent, aimless twaddle, that if you persist in inflicting him upon a long-suffering but exasperated public, we shall make a point of giving up reluctantly your otherwise delightful and admirable paper. How is it that you can pay a man for having the privilege of giving vent to his bile all over your sheets, which are sent in this malodorous condition to flavour the early cup of tea of self and Countess ? " For myself I sympathise with the German

lady who once said to me: "If I was at the play last night, I know what it was like. If I was not, why should I care?" I sympathise still more with the playgoer who, having seen his first mystery play, finds a jaded appreciation of it in next morning's paper and fails to realise that the critic has seen a dozen plays exactly similar within the last six months. And I sympathise most of all with the neophyte who, having witnessed for the first time a soul-shaking masterpiece, finds its indifferent performance indifferently praised. No academic German can entirely spoil the *Venusberg Music*, yet what shall the critic who has heard Beecham play it say of some dull, plodding, Teutonic rendering? I remember the overthrow of a childish soul after the Manchester performance of *Antony and Cleopatra* in the long ago. In my memory this is the grandest performance of any Shakespearean play I have ever seen, by which I probably mean that I have not forgotten the impression first made on me by this brassy, clangorous, trumpet masterpiece. I can believe now that Toole would have excited me as Antony and Louie

Freear thrilled me as Cleopatra. But the reader will agree that a small boy found it disconcerting to read on the following Saturday that the lacerating discord of Janet Achurch's wailings reconciled Mr. Shaw to the grave; and that Mr. Calvert's Antony looked not only as though he had arranged for a fresh boar to be put on the spit every hour, but as if he had eaten them all!

Perhaps the most useful function of the critic is to tell the public what attracts it to any particular play. The most successful comedy of modern times is Mr. Frederick Lonsdale's *The Last of Mrs. Cheyney*. In this play Mr. Lonsdale shuns truth as the fashionable actor shuns acting, and constructs a perfectly commonplace plot which he then redeems from the commonplace by liberal applications from the cruet of his own wit, the pepper and salt being distributed impartially upon the just and the unjust without reference to character. His curtain rises on a gilded saloon giving on to a garden in which the vicious landowners are entertaining the virtuous tillers of the soil. Here a butler with an Oxford manner explains to a footman bred in

each of the Seven Dials that his mistress's guests must be the best people since they have the worst manners. And now the aristocracy enters in inverse order of precedence, like an all-English cricket team going in to bat tail first. Or you might say that baronets twinkle, viscounts coruscate, and dukes silently blaze.

Among the lords are a young drunkard and an elderly fool, and we are to decide in which bosom Mrs. Cheyney will blot herself at the last. At the moment she is left alone in the drawing-room. The shades of eve have fallen fast, the eldest villager moaning adieu has shaken hands and his last sad spectral hairs, the dukes have retired to put on their Garters, and the world is left to darkness and to Mrs. Cheyney, her piano, and Scriabin's Study for the Left Hand. The first footman draws the curtains, extracts a "fag" out of a paper packet, and sits him down to smoke. The lady continues to commune with Scriabin. The second footman and the chauffeur enter and loll about unrebuked from the piano. Finally the witty butler enters smoking the, for him, post-prandial cigar. And now the footman, bored by Scriabin,

interrupts his mistress with the point-blank question: "Wot abaht them pearls?" And we tumble to the fact that Mrs. Cheyney is a crook whose servants are her accomplices. She suspends Scriabin to say she is getting warm. The young gentleman from Seven Dials says that's all right, but Scriabin is rotten, and doesn't she know any musical comedy tunes? Whereupon Miss Gladys Cooper falls to thumping "I Want to be Happy," while the vassalage foots it under the uncomprehending eyes of the Lelys and the Raeburns. *Mrs. Cheyney is obviously proposing to rob her guests under her own roof.* "Curiouser and curioser," said Alice, and "sillier and sillier" might well be an uncomprehending verdict on this play. The young woman, being nabbed, ecstatically proclaims her preference for five years in gaol to a night in the bosom of the disreputable, noble rip. Later she tears up, also ecstatically, a cheque for £10,000, which is the price of her silence on a matter of no importance to anybody. "I may be a pearl thief," she says, "but I am not a blackmailer!" The last of the lady is that she buries herself in

the shirt-front of the youngest nobleman, proposing to bear him a race of sturdy pickpockets and indefatigable dipso-maniacs.

Some little time ago I was engaged to lecture in the New Forest. It was autumn, and in view of the dripping woods and sodden carpet, I determined to lecture on the "Decay of the Drama." When I arrived at the station it was to find awaiting me a Chrysler of unimaginable cylinders, which conducted me to a mansion of unbelievable splendour. Around the luncheon-table were gathered retired generals who had not visited the theatre since Balaclava, one of whom asked me the name of Nellie Farren's latest burlesque. Strachey's *Queen Victoria* being mentioned by a civilian, my hostess who was wearing puce satin and diamonds ventured to opine that majesty had been "a little fast." The champagne, the cigars, and the atmosphere were all so heartening that I changed the title of my lecture to "Why the Drama was Never Healthier," though without altering a word of the script. During its course I expatiated at length upon the follies of Mrs. Cheyney. At

the end of the lecture there was the usual demand for questions. But that part of the audience which had remained asleep being in an uncarping mood, no questions were forthcoming. At last a timid lady rose and said nervously : " My husband and I are thinking of running up to town for the week-end. Does the lecturer think we shall be able to get seats for *The Last of Mrs. Cheyney* ? " That timid lady was right. In spite of the imbecility of its plot, Mr. Lonsdale's piece is the most entertaining play, not being a work of art, which I have seen in the theatre for many a long day. Good criticism will praise this work in spite of its imbecility ; it is hypercriticism of the foolish, supercilious order which condemns it because of an inessential defect. To praise the good where you find it is the whole essence of dramatic criticism. I am conscious that in this little essay I have shelved the deeper emotions. The truth is that the theatre moves me too much to write other than flippantly about it. Many years ago an actor told me that he never went on the stage without realising that in pit or gallery there might be some poor fellow for whom

he was first opening the door to Beauty. I never sit down to write a notice without remembering all that those criticisms in the *Manchester Guardian* and the *Saturday Review* meant to me when I was a boy. I am conscious that it is the privilege of the critic of to-day to write for the boy of to-day. It is possible that those of us who go to the theatre night-in night-out, working for a living in the matter of our former pleasure, may show occasional weariness. "For Heaven's sake," said Garcia to my father, "make the boys into upholsterers, and let them keep the arts for their spare time." That would be a sound maxim, were it not that art, like murder, will out. Dramatic critics are more hardly treated than their musical brethren, or those others who go to look at pictures. A musical critic is not asked to record his impression of the latest bawler of *Il Bacio*, an art critic is not asked to say whether in the latest version of *I se Biggest* the dog or the baby is the better done. But in the world of the theatre the revival of the oldest play is still news, and we must ever pronounce upon private secretaries and Charlie's aunts. Then there is the absurd con-

tention that we should see every piece through, it being apparently impossible for the public to realise that in a barrel of bad beer the last glass will not be any better than, say, the second ; and that to a taster of any competence one glass at most will suffice. In the case of a really bad play, the critic is sufficiently informed after the first act. Bad plays never get any better and you do not lessen tedium by adding to it. I sometimes think that one would write more leniently of bad plays if one were not compelled to sit them out. Compulsion or no compulsion, I don't sit them out and never will.

But when the play is not a poor play, when it makes even the barest show of beginning to look like a good play, why then you shall see the critics sit up *en masse* and begin to take an interest in the notice they are to write. And when the play is really good, or a young actor shows something that is one day going to be talent, who so enthusiastic as the professional critics ? There is a popular theory that we get together in the foyer to damn a bad play ; the truth of the matter is that at a bad play we are too

hideously bored to foregather. But let an Evans enter upon the Restoration scene and fling open the portals of High Comedy, or let one who is little more than a child unveil the secret places of a Sonya or a Juliet. Then shall you see in excited conclave those to whom criticism is a duty and a religion, and playgoing something more than a diversion.

**THE END**

